

U.S. urged to keep space shuttle flying past 2010

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By Irene Klotz

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CAPE CANAVERAL, Florida (Reuters) - The United States should keep flying the space shuttles past their 2010 retirement date to avoid depending on Russia to fly astronauts to the International Space Station, a U.S. congressman said on Monday.

U.S. [Rep. Dave Weldon](#), a Republican whose Florida district includes the Kennedy Space Center, proposed extending the shuttles' lifetime to close the gap until their replacement ships, called Orion, are ready for their first manned flights in 2015.

His proposal, which would cost about \$10 billion, would have the shuttles make six or seven additional flights between 2010 and 2013 and speed up development of the Orion ships to be ready by then.

A second proposal would keep the shuttles flying until 2015 and leave Orion's schedule alone.

"This is an issue of priorities," said Weldon, who announced his plan at the Kennedy Space Center Visitors Center on Monday.

The board investigating the 2003 Columbia accident recommended the shuttle fleet be retired in 2010 unless the fleet was completely recertified, a process that NASA said would be too time-consuming and expensive to attempt.

President George W. Bush accepted the recommendation and ordered the shuttles' retirement. He also directed NASA to complete construction of the International Space Station and develop new spaceships and rockets that could travel to the station as well as to the moon and other destinations in the solar system as part of a program called Constellation.

"The 2010 date was really an arbitrary date that was really picked more by OMB (the U.S. Office of Management and Budget) than NASA," said Weldon spokesman Jeremy Steffens.

"The risk (of flying the shuttle) does not increase overnight. Obviously there's risk and NASA is doing its best to mitigate it. The risk is worth the goals we set out," Steffens said.

As the shuttles' 2010 retirement nears, NASA planned on getting exemptions to a congressional ban that prohibits purchases of Russian Soyuz rockets. The ban was imposed to curb the spread of nuclear weapons technology to Iran, which Russia is accused of helping.

Steffens said that paying the Russians to ferry U.S. astronauts back and forth may not be a viable option either.

NASA hopes that U.S. commercial launch vehicles may be developed to transport cargo and perhaps eventually astronauts to the station.

Congress already rejected a proposed \$1 billion boost to NASA's 2008 budget to keep Orion's development on schedule.

NASA says, however, it is unsafe, expensive and counter-productive to keep flying the shuttle past 2010.

"Flying the space shuttle past 2010 would carry significant risks, particularly to our efforts to build and purchase new transportation systems that are less complex, less expensive to operate, and better suited to serving both (the space station) and exploration missions to the moon, Mars and beyond," NASA administrator Michael Griffin told a Congressional oversight committee last month.

Griffin said it would cost \$2.5 billion to \$4 billion per year to keep the shuttles flying past 2010.

(Editing by Jane Sutton and Philip Barbara)

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